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*The Ideological  
Crisis in the  
Russian Military*

*Eugene B. Rumer*

***National Defense  
Research Institute***

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## PREFACE

This report addresses the issue of Russian nationalism in the Russian military and examines the ideological choices available to the military institution in the aftermath of the Soviet breakup. It follows the Soviet military's unsuccessful quest for new ideological reference points from the Gorbachev era to the present. The report concludes that, in the atmosphere of escalating political, ideological, and economic uncertainty in Russia, the military's cohesion is likely to have been severely undermined, thereby denying the country's political leadership an important source of support. This study draws on extensive interviews conducted by the author in Moscow with Russian military personnel, government officials, and academic security specialists in the course of several research trips in 1990, 1991, and 1992.

This research report was prepared as part of a larger RAND study on nationalism in the former Soviet Union, sponsored by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy within the International Security and Defense Strategy Program of RAND's National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff. The report should be of interest to U.S. Government officials and policy analysts concerned with developments in the former Soviet Union and Russia.



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## SUMMARY

The collapse of the Soviet Union left in its wake the only institution that had aspired to the status of a truly Soviet institution: the military. The Soviet military was dispersed all across the Soviet Union without regard to the ethnic affiliation or geographic origins of its personnel. The collapse of a federal, multiethnic state, held together by force and tradition in the name of Communist ideology, occurred under the strain of centrifugal forces of nationalism and desire for self-determination. In the absence of a new ideological paradigm, history, inextricably tied to nationality and ethnicity, was the only place to begin the search for new ideological reference points. For the predominantly Slavic and largely Russian ex-Soviet officer corps, no historical roots and military traditions exist other than those of the Soviet Army and its predecessor, the Imperial Russian Army.

The military establishment and the leadership of the military propaganda machine—the Main Political Administration of the Armed Forces (MPA)—turned to the history and traditions of the Russian empire as the only source of inspiration for the predominantly Russian career military personnel. As the country's political, societal, and economic crises accelerated, prominent Russian writers with well-known military connections, such as Aleksandr Prokhanov, nicknamed the “Nightingale of the General Staff,” argued that the military institution remains the sole repository of every positive feature of Russian society that will carry its spirit throughout all the trials and tribulations that the Russian empire is bound to encounter in the years to come. The military institution, he has maintained, represents the core of Russian society and state. That core will carry

the society's traditions throughout the upcoming crises and will serve as the basis of its restoration in the future.

The idea of salvation of, and service to, the Russian state had firmly replaced the internationalist ideals of the Soviet military and commitment to the Soviet state in Soviet military propaganda of the late 1980s. If the Soviet state was not worth the military's service, the Russian state had to be.

But the Soviet military's return to its historical roots and attempt to find legitimacy, *raison d'être*, and ideological reference points in the idea of service to Russia and the Russian state offered no simple solutions to the institution's internal crisis. The ideological landscape in the Soviet Union and Russia in the late-Gorbachev and early-Yel'tsin periods was full of turbulence and left few easy choices.

The fiercest and politically most important competition in the Soviet and/or Russian ideological arena of the late 1980s and early 1990s unfolded between proponents of a highly centralized Soviet state and advocates of its transformation into a looser and voluntary association of republics, including the right of outright secession from the Soviet Union.

The pro-union coalition spearheaded by Soviet President Gorbachev was opposed by a broad variety of political regional and national movements and personalities. Most important among them was Russia's own opposition, led by Boris Yel'tsin. Yel'tsin and his political movement, "Democratic Russia," fought their struggle against Gorbachev and pro-union forces on the platform that became known as "Little Russia." Never fully developed by its authors or elaborated to the level of specific policy prescriptions, Little Russia was based on the general notion that Russia's own imperial pursuits had left it drained of energy and resources needed for its economic and social development.

The significance of the Little Russia platform should not be underestimated. Politically and ideologically, it legitimized for the first time in modern Russian and Soviet history a vision of Russia without its empire. It also articulated a rather benign, nonexpansionist version of Russian nationalism, the one that accommodated the principles of self-determination for the peoples of the Soviet Union's

federated republics, with an assertive vision of Russian national interest.

This vision for Russia stood in stark contrast to the vision of the pro-union coalition, which included a diverse and unlikely collection of political groups and interests, from Gorbachev and his moderate but nonetheless reform-minded supporters to the defense-industrialist lobby, the conservative military high command, and reactionary Communist and great Russian nationalist ideologues. The Soviet Union, one and indivisible, in their view, could be the only successor to the historical Russian state.

The Soviet Union's political crisis culminated in the ill-fated coup in August 1991. Although the coup has been frequently portrayed as a military takeover, the event hardly fit that description. It did, indeed, involve the country's military leadership, and a relatively small number of military personnel were deployed on the streets of Moscow and several other key cities. But most of the military institution had remained uninvolved. With the exception of several notable defections from the ranks of the conservative high command, including Generals Shaposhnikov, Grachev, and Samsonov, to the Yel'tsin camp, little can be said with confidence about the political leanings of most of the officer corps. Arguably, the majority of Soviet officers did not differ significantly from the rest of the population: Frustrated after years of failed reforms, unfulfilled promises, and declining standards of living, they probably welcomed a relatively peaceful and painless replacement of the old regime with a new one, seeking legitimacy in democratic principles and identifying with Russia and its national interest rather than with abstract and discredited internationalist ideas.

Following the breakup, the economic situation rapidly deteriorated throughout the former Soviet Union, leaving little chance for sorting out the political and ideological dilemmas that quickly came to the fore of the Russian agenda. The key question left unanswered in the aftermath of the Soviet breakup has been, What is the future of Russia itself, left without its empire?

As a multiethnic and nominally federal state, Russia succumbed to the same centrifugal forces of nationalism, regionalism, and sepa-

ratism that had led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Except, this time, at stake was the integrity of the Russian state itself.

Although the victory of the Yel'tsin coalition dealt a powerful blow to the conservative opposition, the latter's setback was far from fatal. The old *nomenklatura* has remained entrenched in Russia's legislature, as well as throughout the administrative and governmental structures, posing a formidable challenge to the new government and its political and economic initiatives.

The political and economic impasse has resulted in further radicalization of the domestic political and ideological environment. As Russia itself began to face the prospect of disintegration, competing definitions of its national interest and statehood became ever more polarized. Dominant among those definitions has become the neoimperialist vision, which was spurred by the enormity of the challenge of post-Soviet transition.

The advocates of Russia as one and indivisible, and ruled by a firm hand from Moscow, have found natural allies in the neoimperialists and those eager to protect the rights of Russian minorities abroad. If translated into concrete policies, their rhetoric will commit Russia to the course of reexpansion abroad and reconstitution of a firm central regime at home. In the circumstances of growing political turmoil, declining economic performance, and the loss of legitimacy by the central government in Moscow, the military remains the sole institutional actor or instrument in the hands of political leaders that can potentially restore Russia to the reexpansionist course.

However, in the increasingly polarized Russian ideological and political environment, the military institution's allegiance and political and ideological preferences remain uncertain. Still suffering from the trauma of its withdrawal from Eastern Europe, the military is currently struggling with the challenge of redeployment from some of the former republics (the Baltics, Transcaucasia); attempts to sustain military presence in others (Central Asia) and protect Russian interests in them; and efforts to "put out the fires" of ethnic and regional conflict on the territory of the Russian Federation proper (Caucasus). Its lines of supplies and communications have been disrupted in many areas, leaving to local commanders the task of providing the troops with the most basic necessities.

Moreover, although President Yel'tsin appears to have the support of the top military leadership in Moscow—most important, that of Defense Minister General Grachev personally—Grachev's own ability to control regional commanders and troops below them is likely to be more questionable than ever before. General Grachev's repeated appeals to the country's competing political elite and factions not to involve the military in their struggles may be an implicit admission of his own lack of faith in the institution's cohesion and his fear of its ultimate disintegration in the event of such involvement.

In the absence of undisputed political and ideological leadership in today's Russia and amid significant economic decline, a unifying ideological platform is not likely to appear soon. Xenophobic nationalism and neoimperialism offer the easiest and politically most tempting solution to this crisis. However, Russia's economic weakness and the declining authority of Moscow vis-à-vis the growing disintegrative forces of regionalism and nationalism leave grave doubts about the chances of any attempt to restore law and order in the country in the name of the great Russian state. The sorry condition of the military institution and its questionable internal cohesion leave serious doubts about the ability of the central Russian government to restore, by force, its authority and power throughout the Russian Federation. The prospects for success of such an attempt involving the military appear dimmer than the country's chances of sliding into chaos, possibly precipitating Russia's disintegration, just as the August coup of 1991 pushed the Soviet Union over the brink.



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## INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union left in its wake the only institution that had aspired to the status of being a truly Soviet institution: the military. Of the four pillars of the Soviet regime—the Communist Party, the secret police (KGB), the military, and the government bureaucracy—the military was the sole institution that could lay claim to being truly Soviet. Whereas the Communist Party, the KGB, and the government all had been composed of regional organizations with their own unique ethnic and national characteristics, the military had no such regional differences. The Soviet military was one and the same throughout the former Soviet Union.

Led by a largely Slav officer corps and staffed by conscripts of every nationality, the Soviet military was dispersed all across the Soviet Union without regard to the ethnic affiliation or geographic origins of its personnel. Recruits from Central Asia were just as likely to be found in construction troops, building roads or installations in Central European regions of the Russian Federation, as Ukrainian conscripts from Kiev were to be found serving in Air Defense troops in Lithuania. Professional officers were regularly reassigned to posts scattered across the former Soviet Union, “punching their tickets” at bases ranging from Eastern Europe to Russia’s Far East, often retiring and finding scarce housing in cities thousands of miles from their place of birth, and losing all ties to their native communities.

The breakup of the Soviet Union found many members of the Soviet military institution stationed in foreign lands. For regular recruits conscripted to the Soviet military for two or three years, dissolution of the Soviet Union posed relatively few problems because of the



temporary nature of the recruits' association with the military institution.

For career officers, the problem was much more serious. The breakup of the Soviet Union left them without either a country or a sense of national identity. The country to which they pledged allegiance and to whose defense they had devoted their entire lives did not exist anymore. No longer were they defined as Soviet citizens but, rather, as Ukrainians, Russians, or Byelorussians. Suddenly, they were forced to search for their national and/or ethnic roots, new ideological reference points, objects of allegiance, and guiding principles for their conduct.

The collapse of a federal, multiethnic state held together by force and tradition in the name of Communist ideology occurred under the strain of centrifugal forces of nationalism and desire for self-determination. Such forces have remained unopposed by a countervailing ideology that could serve as a common platform to keep the country together. In the aftermath of the Soviet breakup, national and/or ethnic affiliation became the prime basis for identification for the people of the ex-USSR. The military institution was no exception to this phenomenon.

As difficult as the process of post-Soviet self-identification has been for many former Soviet citizens in civilian life, the search for national identity has undoubtedly been most difficult for career military personnel—the most Soviet of all Soviet people. In the absence of a new ideological paradigm, history, inextricably tied to nationality and ethnicity, was the only place to begin that search.

For the predominantly Slavic and largely Russian ex-Soviet officer corps, no historical roots and military traditions exist other than those of the Soviet Army and its predecessor, the Imperial Russian Army. For officers of Slavic but not Russian origin—Ukrainian, for example—who made up the minority of the officer corps, national military traditions did not exist. Having come under Russian domination more than three centuries before, Ukraine had ceased to exist as an independent state and had no military of its own. For centuries, these officers' ancestors fought in the ranks of the army of the Russian and Soviet empire, the army of the state that had occupied their native lands and from which they were now free.

However, for the majority—officers of ethnic Russian origin—history offered much more meaningful associations. Lack of national experience did not stand in the way of a Russian military officer's search for historical and ideological roots in the baggage inherited from the Russian Imperial and Soviet Army as it would for Uzbek or Ukrainian officers whose native lands had long been colonized by Russia. The key accomplishments of that military institution—conquest of vast territories and defeat of foreign invasions—amounted to a record that would make any military proud, especially after that record had been carefully censored and extensively embellished by the Soviet propaganda machine.

Nonetheless, the years of *perestroyka* and *glasnost* uncovered many previously concealed stains on the reputation of the Soviet military. The disclosure of long-hidden archival documents, personal memoirs, and suppressed publications of Soviet historians made it clear to post-World War II generations of the general public and the military establishment that the Soviet Army's record in that war was not as spotless as decades of propaganda had made it appear. Internal problems of the Soviet military institution—corruption and nepotism among senior military personnel, ethnic tensions among recruits, and widespread incompetence—became matters of public knowledge, undermining the military's standing in society, as well as the internal cohesion of the military institution itself.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the record of the Soviet era in the military's history could hardly serve as a source of inspiration for the ex-Soviet officers searching for historical roots and ideological reference points in post-Soviet Russia. What those officers were left with have been the heritage of the Russian Imperial Army and the challenge of finding the military's roots in it, as well as a sense of national identity and purpose in post-Soviet Russia. The Russian military had to make a transition from a multiethnic state built on the principle of proletarian internationalism to the Russian state with uncertain principles and constitution: It had to find both a country and an idea to serve.

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<sup>1</sup>For more on problems in the military, see Eugene B. Rumer, *The End of a Monolith: The Politics of Military Reform in the Soviet Armed Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, R-3993-USDP, 1990.



The historical record of the Russian Imperial Army had long been a sensitive issue. From the standpoint of Soviet official propaganda and military historiography, ideological constraints required that a delicate balance be found between proper recognition of the army's accomplishments on the one hand and politically correct assessment of its negative role as an arm of an oppressive imperial regime on the other hand.

### **THE RETURN OF RUSSIAN MILITARY HISTORY**

The legacy of the Russian Imperial Army was first brought into the spotlight by the Soviet regime during World War II, when the Soviet propaganda machine had to mobilize the armed forces and the population at large in defense of the Soviet state. Mobilization was done not in the name of the first proletarian state but in the name of the "Fatherland" or "Mother Russia." The Soviet propaganda effort of that era restored to the memory of the Soviet people some events and personalities from Russian military and general history that had previously been ignored or downplayed; it put a uniquely Soviet interpretation on others. For example, that era produced historical novels by Alexey Tolstoy on Peter the Great and films about Ivan the Terrible and Alexandr Nevskiy, and restored Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to its proper place in the Soviet school curriculum.

With the recognition of the Imperial Russian Army, the leadership of the Soviet military establishment sought to instill a sense of tradition and continuity in the Soviet officer corps. In 1944, the Ministry of Defense reprinted tsarist-era instructions for junior officers on rela-

tions with their subordinates. The foreword to that edition contained the following passage:

The Red Army is the heir of the best traditions and military experience of the old Russian Army. The Russian Army has accumulated a lot of most valuable experience in the area of military education in the course of the many centuries of its history. Much of that experience is still relevant.<sup>1</sup>

Military decorations for valor were introduced that had their origin in the Russian Imperial Army. Among them were medals named after eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Field Marshals Suvorov and Kutuzov, and nineteenth-century Admirals Ushakov and Nakhimov. The Soviet government's highest decorations for bravery by enlisted personnel and noncommissioned officers were patterned after the famous tsarist St. George's Cross.

With victory in World War II, the Soviet propaganda machine could again return to the safe confines of Marxist-Leninist internationalism. However, the taboo on using Russian military history had been broken. The establishment of the *Military-Historical Journal* by the Ministry of Defense in the late 1950s provided the Soviet military community with a source of information about the traditions, dress, decorations, battlefield record, and personalities of the old tsarist army. Such articles were almost always relegated to the back pages of the magazine, to the sections that the magazine's editors and censors probably considered suitable for lighter reading and of more personal than professional interest.

Other Soviet military magazines—the Ground Troops' *Military Herald* and the Navy's *Naval Digest*—also published articles on pre-1917 Russian military and naval history. They included descriptions of major nineteenth-century military and naval campaigns, biographical profiles of prominent commanders, and, occasionally, excerpts from military-historical fiction. For the most part, such publications dealt with politically safe historical subjects and personalities from the late-eighteenth–early-nineteenth centuries, such as Field Marshals Kutuzov and Suvorov and the leader of the guerilla move-

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<sup>1</sup>*Nachal'nik i Podchinennyye*, Moscow: Voennoye Izdatel'stvo Narodnogo Kommisariata Oborony, 1944.

ment of the War of 1812, Denis Davydov, who had been officially recognized as Russian national heroes.

Pre-revolutionary military history was unlike military history of the Soviet era, especially the experience of World War II, to which most Soviet military historiography was dedicated. It was considered of little relevance from the standpoint of either military theory and practice or ideology. Soviet military periodicals serving the broad military community devoted little, if any, attention to analysis of pre-1917 Russian military campaigns or exploration of political and ideological values that had guided Russia's military establishment of the pre-revolutionary era. Overall, Russian, as opposed to Soviet, military history was relegated to a minor place in Soviet military historiography and propaganda of the pre-*perestroyka* era.

### THE IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS OF *PERESTROYKA*

The relaxation of political and ideological constraints with the beginning of *perestroyka* and the campaign of *glasnost'* resulted in a fundamental change in the ideological climate within the Soviet military, a change that followed the lead of the Soviet society at large.

In their initial attempts to find proper ideological and historical origins for their initiatives, Gorbachev and his associates were forced to admit that the entire 60-year post-Leninist period of Soviet history was a mistake, a deviation from the correct course charted by Lenin. The solution to the country's problems, they argued, could be found in the abandonment of Stalinist heresies and a return to the true Leninist principles. To back up this claim and prove that there had been alternatives to Stalinism, a certain degree of historical revisionism was even encouraged by Soviet leaders.

However, owing to the rapidly expanding limits of *glasnost'* and especially after the publication in the USSR of many previously banned works by writers and historians, most notably Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, such revisionist claims quickly lost credibility in the eyes of the public. The legitimacy of the Soviet government and the Soviet state were coming increasingly into question.

The ideological vacuum was filled quickly by the nationalism sweeping across every republic and region of the Soviet Union. The

relaxed political climate in the country permitted public expression of discontent about economic mismanagement, ecological problems, decline of local languages and cultures, and other issues that inevitably prompted the question, Who was the guilty party? In a country as large and ethnically diverse as the Soviet Union, tightly controlled by the central government in Moscow, the blame was inevitably pinned on Moscow, the seat of the all-union government and center of the empire. Local intellectuals and politicians argued that, had they been in charge of their local destinies and resources, their regions would have been better off than they were after decades of Moscow's dictates.

In a series of all-union, republican, regional, and local elections that took place in the Soviet Union beginning in 1989, many candidates sensed the anti-Moscow mood of the electorate and responded to it in their electoral platforms. Emboldened by *glasnost'* and taking advantage of the grass-roots support for their ideas, they put forth a series of nationalist-regionalist-separatist centrifugal agendas that virtually ensured their election and began to tear the Soviet Union apart.

The Soviet military was not immune to the influence of *glasnost'*. The most Soviet of all Soviet institutions, it began to show growing signs of internal divisions and the loss of ideological bearings that were affecting the rest of the Soviet society. Moreover, the military found itself in a particularly difficult situation because it was singled out by the Gorbachev-era Soviet propaganda machine for criticism.

The Soviet military became another victim of *glasnost'*. Until *perestroika*, it had been an institution most securely protected from public scrutiny, let alone accusations of incompetence, corruption, or complicity in the decline of the Soviet economy. Until *perestroika*, its reputation had rested firmly on laurels of victory in World War II, the conquest of the East European empire, and achievement for the Soviet Union of the status of a superpower second to none. These accomplishments were codified and glorified in nearly half a century of post-World War II official Soviet propaganda.

Effectively undoing such accomplishments of the Soviet propaganda machine, *glasnost'* revealed massive waste, corruption, inter-ethnic tensions, incompetence, and nepotism in the military. In addition to

the damage caused to the military's domestic political standing and authority in matters of national defense, these revelations eroded the internal spirit of the military institution, leaving it with both a tarnished façade and a deep morale problem.

Spurred by revelations of internal problems in military institutions, recruits in many regions of the Soviet Union began to refuse to report for military service outside their native areas. They were supported by local populations, as well as by political authorities increasingly sensitive to expressions of local concerns. The reputation of the military institution rapidly declined to its lowest point in the history of the Soviet Union (1989–1990).

Worst of all, the demise of the official Soviet ideology amidst the tumult of *glasnost* and growing perception of illegitimacy of the Soviet state left the Soviet military without an ideological *raison d'être* at a time when its role as the key pillar of the Soviet state was becoming increasingly important to the future of that state. Amid the growing crisis of that state's legitimacy, the military's reputation as its defender was beginning to reflect negatively upon the military itself, posing a severe challenge to the institution's morale.

As the official Soviet ideology and the historical record of the Soviet state became a no-longer-viable rationale for military service to that state, the military institution began to search for new historical and ideological reference points that would give it legitimacy; provide it with a new *raison d'être*; and boost the spirit of military personnel, most important, its officer corps. As elsewhere in Soviet society, nationalism offered the only alternative to the discredited Marxist-Leninist dogma.

Increasingly, the military establishment and the leadership of the military propaganda machine—the Main Political Administration of the Armed Forces (MPA)—turned to the history and traditions of the Russian empire as the only source of inspiration for the predominantly Russian career military personnel. Soviet military periodicals supervised by the MPA began to devote more space to articles on prominent Russian military personalities and accomplishments of the Russian Imperial Army and Navy. The articles covered, in unprecedented detail, many aspects of Russian military heritage, from the history of Russian military uniforms, regimental traditions, and



decorations, to descriptions of important battles and biographies of Russian generals.

Military periodicals also published excerpts from, or serialized military-historical fiction by, civilian writers, such as Vladimir Pikul' and Karem Rash. They glorified Russian military conquests of centuries past and highlighted the role of the Russian military in society throughout the history of the Russian state.

These writings emphasized several prominent themes: the unequivocally positive role of the military institution in Russia's history; the apparent lack of appreciation of that role by the country's succession of political elite before and after the October revolution of 1917, and, frequently, by Russian society at large; the role of the military as the pillar of the Russian state, indeed empire, when all other institutions failed; the organic unity of Russian military tradition and the spirit of the Russian state, and the indivisibility of the two.

As the country's political, societal, and economic crises accelerated, prominent Russian writers with well-known military connections, such as Aleksandr Prokhanov, nicknamed the "Nightingale of the General Staff," argued that the military institution remains the sole repository of every positive feature of Russian society that will carry its spirit throughout all the trials and tribulations the Russian empire is bound to encounter in the years to come. The military institution, he has maintained, represents the core of Russian society and state, a core that will carry that state's traditions throughout the upcoming crises and will serve as the basis of its restoration in the future.

Writing in the military's daily *Red Star* as early as 1988, Prokhanov was the first among Soviet journalists and writers to hint at the possibility of a military coup as a weapon of last resort amid the processes of state and societal disintegration. Still restricted by traditional Soviet constraints on political expression, he wrote about the Polish military and its takeover of the government in 1981. The analogy to the growing political crisis in the Soviet Union was unmistakable. Prokhanov extolled the wisdom and courage of the military institution, which stepped into the political void to save the country from chaos unleashed by irresponsible politicians. He was careful to emphasize that the role played by the military was not that of a Latin American-style oppressive dictatorial regime, but of a benign force, a

shoulder on which the exhausted country and society could lean in search of stability and a much-needed time to pause and collect its strength.

Having pioneered the theme of military coup in Soviet literature, Prokhanov became its most ardent proponent, eventually openly calling for military takeover shortly before the failed August coup of 1991. In a front-page interview with Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy Admiral Chernavin and Commandant of the General Staff Academy General Rodionov, published in May of 1991, Prokhanov suggested that the time had come for the military to take matters into its own hands while the Soviet state disintegrated and before the country slipped into chaos.

The idea of salvation of, and service to, the Russian state had firmly replaced the internationalist ideals of the Soviet military and commitment to the Soviet state in the Soviet military propaganda of the late 1980s. It was an understandable, perhaps rational, response by an institution that had been denied the rationale for its existence and whose very existence was threatened by the decline of the official ideology of proletarian internationalism and the rise of centrifugal forces of nationalism and regionalism that put in jeopardy the state itself. If the Soviet state was not worth the military's service, the Russian state had to be.



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**WHICH RUSSIA?**

The Soviet military's return to its historical roots and attempt to find legitimacy, *raison d'être*, and ideological reference points in the idea of service to Russia and the Russian state offered no simple solutions to the institution's internal crisis. The discontent among the officer corps was reflected in an unprecedented outpouring of complaints about service and living conditions, the election of maverick military deputies from the ranks of junior- and mid-level officers, and the establishment of an independent, grass-roots organization of Soviet officers. The ideological landscape in the Soviet Union and Russia in the late-Gorbachev and early-Yel'tsin periods was turbulent and left few easy choices.

The fiercest and politically most important competition in the Soviet and Russian ideological arena of the late 1980s and early 1990s unfolded between proponents of a highly centralized Soviet state and advocates of its transformation into a looser, voluntary association of republics, including the right of outright secession from the Soviet Union. The pro-union coalition, spearheaded by Soviet President Gorbachev, was opposed by a broad variety of political regional and national movements and personalities. Most important among them was Russia's own opposition to Gorbachev and his pro-union coalition led by Boris Yel'tsin.

Yel'tsin and his political movement, "Democratic Russia," fought their struggle against Gorbachev and pro-union forces on the platform that became known as "Little Russia." Never fully developed by its authors or elaborated to the level of specific policy prescriptions, Little Russia was based on the general notion that Russia's own

imperial pursuits had left it drained of energy and resources needed for its economic and social development. Russia, in effect, had become the worst victim of its own centuries-old expansionist pursuits, sharing too generously its resources with its colonies. Accordingly, the solution to Russia's economic and societal problems could be found only in abandoning the empire; rebuilding ties with the former colonies on the basis of mutually perceived interests; and reorienting Russia's energies and flow of resources inward to solve its own domestic problems.

The significance of the Little Russia platform should not be underestimated. Politically and ideologically, it legitimized for the first time in modern Russian and Soviet history a vision of Russia without its empire. It also articulated a rather benign, nonexpansionist version of Russian nationalism, a version that accommodated the principles of self-determination for the peoples of the Soviet Union's federated republics with an assertive vision of Russian national interest.

In the circumstances of the ideological vacuum left in the wake of the end of official Soviet ideology, declining economic performance, and growing disenchantment with President Gorbachev, the new Russian idea had significant political appeal at the grass-roots level. Two factors determined the success of that new idea: It was perceived as democratic, building on the aspirations of Russia's people and reflecting their views and interests; and it identified clearly the party responsible for Russia's many ills—the Soviet imperial government in Moscow.

Boris Yel'tsin and his coalition of Little Russia supporters also "staked out" an anti-imperial position on behalf of the Russian population that was clearly distinct from, and opposed to, the principles on which the Soviet Union was built. They had, in effect, denied the traditional Soviet ideologues their historical Russian roots by articulating a general vision of Russia and Russia's national interest as distinctly different from, and even at odds with, the Soviet Union and its imperial nature and interests. The Russia of Boris Yel'tsin and his democratic coalition in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a country that would have "shed" most of its territorial conquests of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a country confined to the borders of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR),

from which Boris Yel'tsin had waged and won his political struggle against Gorbachev and his union center.

In stark contrast, the vision of the pro-union coalition included a diverse and unlikely collection of political groups and interests, from Gorbachev and his moderate but nonetheless reform-minded supporters to the defense-industrialist lobby, the conservative military high command, and reactionary Communist and great Russian nationalist ideologues. Having lost the official Soviet ideology as the justification for their political and policy agenda, they had few options left but to seek a rationale for the Soviet Union in the history of the Russian empire. The Soviet Union, one and indivisible, in their view, could be the only successor to the historical Russian state.

These two competing visions presented clear choices to the population of Russia and the Soviet Union: preservation of the empire or its radical transformation, possibly leading to its breakup. Throughout the non-Russian Soviet republics swept by the ideological winds of nationalism and separatism, the choice was unequivocally the latter.

Russia—the great metropole—seemed to have also chosen the path of transformation. In a series of parliamentary and presidential elections held in 1990 and 1991, the people of Russia rejected the imperialist choice and the chauvinist nationalist agenda, voting instead for Boris Yel'tsin and his platform of Little Russia.



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## THE MILITARY BETWEEN “LITTLE RUSSIA” AND THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

Throughout this political and ideological turmoil of transformation, the mood and the potential role of the military institution had remained the biggest source of uncertainty in the equation of Soviet domestic politics. But whereas the reactionary leanings of many in the high command were well known from their increasingly open imperialist and nationalist rhetoric, the mood and political makeup of the largely Russian officer corps remained unknown. In the atmosphere of intensifying political struggle between proponents of reforms (i.e., dissolution of the empire) and advocates of the status quo (i.e., preservation of the empire), the military became the sole institution potentially capable of halting the unraveling of the Soviet Union. However, the extent to which the institution embraced either of the two radically different ideological visions for Russia and the Soviet Union remained unknown.

The monolith of the Soviet military had obviously begun to crumble under the weight of economic and societal problems that had led to the fractionation of the Soviet society at large. The high command maintained an increasingly conservative position, aligning itself with the representatives of the defense-industrial complex and ideologues from Russian nationalist and Communist circles, adopting their rhetoric, and purging dissident voices from the military. A number of prominent senior military officers, such as Commander of the Volga-Ural Military District General Makashev and Commander of the Transcaucasian Military District and subsequently Commandant of the General Staff Academy General Rodionov, engaged in unprece-



dented political assault on the country's leaders, openly criticizing these policies.

The high command denounced Gorbachev from the extreme right ideological positions, faulting him for the country's economic and political crises, disintegrating social fabric, loss of the external empire in Eastern Europe, and endangerment of the internal empire. Yel'tsin became the target of equally virulent attacks, held up as the leader of forces fundamentally opposed to the Soviet state who had betrayed Russia's traditional national interests.

While increasingly outspoken and reactionary, the high command seemed to have rejected publicly the notion that the military institution could play the role of a stabilizing force in the Soviet Union's political crisis. Its representatives sounded repeated warnings against involving the military in domestic contingencies. The military's noninvolvement in nonpolitical communal inter-ethnic violence in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan in 1989 was explained by the desire to keep it out of domestic ethnic and political struggles.

At the same time, in a number of situations involving matters of ethnic and political mobilization in support of agendas for national self-determination, the high command did not shy away from the use of force and military involvement in, for example, massacres of civilians in the Baltic states, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

Such selective use of force seemed intended to have a dual demonstrative effect: to deter secessionist movements, and to highlight the negative consequences of Gorbachev's political reforms and relaxation of political controls, which, presumably, resulted in little other than communal inter-ethnic violence.

None of these contingencies, however, occurred in areas populated by ethnic Russians or members of other Slavic ethnic groups. The use of force against non-Russian or non-Slavic minorities was limited in geographic scope and duration. It reflected a degree of cohesion and a certain ability to follow orders on the part of the military institution. Yet, the key questions remained unanswered: Would the predominantly Slavic and Russian military be able to function either as an independent political actor or as an instrument in the hands of political authorities in a conflict that would pit Russia against the Soviet Union or Yel'tsin against Gorbachev? Would the military em-

brace the idea of Little Russia or side with proponents of the empire? Or would the military itself become divided into similar factions?

The Soviet Union's political crisis culminated in the ill-fated coup in August 1991. Although frequently portrayed as a military takeover, the event hardly fit that description. Indeed, it involved the country's military leadership, and a relatively small number of military personnel were deployed on the streets of Moscow and several other key cities. But most of the military institution remained uninvolved.

With the exception of several notable defections from the ranks of the conservative high command, including Generals Shaposhnikov, Grachev, and Samsonov to the Yel'tsin camp, little could be said with confidence about the political leanings of the majority of the Soviet officer corps, who, arguably, did not differ significantly from the rest of the population: Frustrated after years of failed reforms, unfulfilled promises, and declining standards of living, they probably welcomed a relatively peaceful and painless replacement of the old regime with a new one, seeking legitimacy in democratic principles and identifying with Russia and its national interest rather than with abstract and discredited internationalist ideas.

The support among the military for the new regime in Moscow was likely to stem not from a perceptible commitment to the idea of Little Russia and the policy consequences following from it, but from the hope that change would be for the better.

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**AFTER THE BREAKUP**

Few such hopes were realized following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Rather, the economic situation rapidly deteriorated throughout the former Soviet Union, leaving little chance for sorting out the political and ideological dilemmas that quickly came to the fore of the Russian agenda. The key question left unanswered in the aftermath of the Soviet breakup has been, What is the future of Russia itself, left without its empire?

As a multiethnic and nominally federal state, Russia succumbed to the same centrifugal forces of nationalism, regionalism, and separatism that had led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Except, this time, the integrity of the Russian state itself was at stake. Moreover, the breakup of the Soviet Union left in its wake the problem of what to do with those ethnic Russians who remained in the former Soviet republics, including military personnel and their dependents. Few, if any of these problems had been anticipated and addressed in advance by the authors of the Little Russia concept.

Although the victory of the Yel'tsin coalition dealt a powerful blow to the conservative opposition, the latter's setback was far from fatal. The old *nomenklatura* has remained entrenched in Russia's legislature, as well as throughout the administrative and governmental structures, posing a formidable challenge to the new government and its political and economic initiatives.

The economic and political impasse has resulted in further radicalization of the domestic political and ideological environment. As Russia itself began to face the prospect of disintegration, competing definitions of its national interest and statehood became ever more



polarized. Dominant among them has become the neoimperialist vision spurred by the enormity of the challenge of post-Soviet transition.

The task of formulating an independent Russia's national interest and concept of statehood has become tied inextricably to the task of building anew relations with its former colonies. To the ethnic Chechen citizens of the Chechen Republic within Russia seeking national self-determination, the argument about the need to maintain the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation means little if the Republic of Moldova has been allowed to secede from Moscow. Why should they not have the same right? Where should the line be drawn in the post-Soviet Russia on a nation's right to self-determination?

Conversely, a number of traditional Russian areas long populated by ethnic Russians have become foreign lands. Is Russia to abandon them now? How should it formulate its policy toward them and ensure the rights of ethnic Russians without appearing threatening to the neighboring states?

In principle, the concept of Little Russia had committed Moscow to the policy of peaceful coexistence with its former colonies; nevertheless, political and economic realities have clouded the original principles and Moscow's and other parties' ability to live up to them. Furthermore, the urgent need for Russia's internal transformation under the strain of centrifugal forces has contributed to the political impasse and radicalization of the political and ideological environment.

The advocates of Russia as one, indivisible, and ruled by a firm hand from Moscow have found natural allies in the neoimperialists and those eager to protect the rights of Russian minorities abroad. If translated into concrete policies, their rhetoric will commit Russia to the course of reexpansion abroad and reconstitution of a firm, central regime at home.

In the circumstances of growing political turmoil, declining economic performance, and the loss of legitimacy by the central government in Moscow, the military remains the sole institutional actor or instrument in the hands of political leaders potentially capable of restoring Russia to that reexpansionist course. However, in the in-

creasingly polarized Russian ideological and political environment, the military institution's allegiance and political ideological preferences remain uncertain. The choices have become starker, but not easier.

General economic decline has affected the military institution, eroding its potential as a fighting force and raising severe doubts about its internal cohesion. At present, the military institution does not appear as a potential independent political actor in Russia's domestic politics. It seems more likely to become a pawn of other political forces.

Still suffering from the trauma of its withdrawal from Eastern Europe, the military is currently struggling with the challenge of redeployment from some of the former republics (the Baltics, Transcaucasia); attempts to sustain military presence in others (Central Asia) and to protect Russian interests in them; and efforts to "put out the fires" of ethnic and regional conflict on the territory of the Russian Federation proper (Caucasus). Its lines of supplies and communications have been disrupted in many areas, leaving to local commanders themselves the task of providing the troops with the most basic necessities.

Russia's First Deputy Defense Minister Andrey Kokoshin recently acknowledged that most of the Russian military is not a credible fighting force that Moscow could rely on in case of emergency. His succinct words speak for themselves:

The Ground Forces are going through difficult times. Many units are in a state of complete distress as a result of rapid redeployment of personnel from the [former republics and Eastern Europe], as well as due to catastrophic shortage of manpower. The more combat capable airborne units have already been committed to numerous peacekeeping operations. In the Air Force there are shortages of fuel and therefore few training flights, which hurts the quality of pilots. Besides, many modern aircraft and transport aviation have been left in Ukraine. A large number of naval ships are in port because of lack of fuel and naval personnel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pavel Fel'gengauer, "Rossii Pridetsya Stroit' Svoyu Oboronu na Yadernykh Strategicheskikh Vooruzheniyakh Eto Naibolee Boyesposobnaya Chast' Rossiyskoy Armii," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 19, 1992.

Moreover, while President Yel'tsin appears to have the support of the top military leadership in Moscow—most important, that of Defense Minister General Grachev personally—Grachev's own ability to control regional commanders and troops below them is likely to be more questionable than ever before. General Grachev's repeated appeals to the country's competing political elite and factions not to involve the military in their struggles may be an implicit admission of his own lack of faith in the institution's cohesion and his fear of its ultimate disintegration in the event of such involvement.

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## CONCLUSION

In these circumstances, little can be said with certainty about the military institution's ideological preferences and inclination to embrace any one given ideological and political agenda. The military, just as the rest of post-Soviet Russian society, is likely to be divided and confused, without a clear ideological vision or preferences. It is likely to be considering itself more a part of the general societal turmoil than a pillar on which Russia can rest in search of stability and a much-needed pause for reflection about its future.

The decline of the official Marxism-Leninism left the Soviet military without clear and ready ideological reference points, thus making it the pawn of increasingly radicalized, competing political and ideological agendas in Russia's post-Soviet marketplace of ideas. As the vision of Russia's national interest and statehood became divided and eventually mired in Russia's escalating domestic political and economic crisis, the military leadership's attempts to redefine the institution's mission and *raison d'être* in traditional historical terms of service to the Russian state failed. Although in its own collective mentality, the post-Soviet military institution unquestionably perceives itself as the heir to the pre-revolutionary Russian Army and as a servant of the Russian state and defender of Russian interests, a vision of what that state and interest are today and should be in the future, is missing.

In the absence of undisputed political and ideological leadership in today's Russia and amid accelerating economic decline, such a vision is not likely to appear soon. Nationalism and neoimperialism offer the easiest and politically most tempting solution to this crisis.



However, Russia's economic weakness and the declining authority of Moscow vis-à-vis the growing disintegrative forces of regionalism and nationalism leave grave doubts about the chances of any attempt to restore law and order in the country in the name of the great Russian state. The sorry condition of the military institution and its questionable internal cohesion put in doubt its utility in the hands of the central Russian government.

The military's support for Yel'tsin during the constitutional crisis in early October 1993 demonstrated that Russia's president can count on the central military institution and elite military units deployed in the vicinity of Moscow. Senior military commanders in Russia's provinces also sided with their president, evidently unwilling to risk a split in the military ranks and oppose the popularly elected commander in chief. However, the larger and more important question of the Russian military's cohesion and ability to follow orders of the country's political leaders remains unanswered.

The most important question is, Is the military's support for Yel'tsin in the October crisis an indication of its behavior in possible future crises and a sign of loyalty to the president? In many respects, the crisis was an easy test of the military's loyalty. Yel'tsin remains the most popular leader in Russia; his political appeal is far greater than that of deposed Vice President Rutskoy or parliamentary speaker Khasbulatov. Supported by a ragtag band of nationalist-communist fringe, these two leaders were widely seen as remnants of the old, unpopular Communist regime. The choice was easy and obvious.

Future contingencies may involve tougher choices. The October events were very much a crisis of the old, rather than the new, Russia. The crisis was a confrontation in Russia's capital, a fight for control of the central government. But the center of gravity of Russian politics has now shifted to the provinces, which want greater autonomy. The center is reluctant to yield on key matters of self-government.

It is one thing to storm a small group of political outcasts who have shed innocent blood in their unpopular quest to preserve the old system. It is quite a different challenge to bring back under Moscow's control one or more regions of Russia after they have decided to stop remitting taxes to the federal government, especially when such an

action has the full support of the local citizenry, who are fed up with the inefficiency of the central government.

It appears that if that government were to attempt to restore by force its power and authority throughout the Russian Federation, the move would endanger the integrity of the Russian state, evoking an analogy with the August coup of 1991, which pushed the Soviet Union over the brink.







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